



# Facing fear borne of Newtown's tragedy

**M**any parents preoccupied with helping their kids cope with the murders in Connecticut are simultaneously trying to deal with their own anxieties over the tragedy.

"The school shooting is indescribably horrific, and it's certainly understandable that people are traumatized," says Locust Valley psychologist Leah Klungness.

She and other Long Island experts offer the following strategies for mothers and fathers grappling with fears for their children's safety in the wake of yet another mass shooting:

- **If your district hasn't already sent an email to parents describing its safety procedures, ask for the policy.** "More knowledge helps you reduce anxiety," says psychologist Renee Clauselle, founder of Child and Family Psychology with offices in Franklin Square, Garden City and Kings Park. "Ask the leadership in your school, 'How are you going to protect our kids?'" Are doors locked? Are safety personnel posted at buildings? Is identification required to enter the school? Keep repeating to yourself: "Here is the plan the leadership has put into place." Clauselle has a 9-year-old and an 11-year-old; she says she felt comfortable putting them on the bus this week because she got an email from her superintendent reviewing safety policies.

- **Review the odds.** "This is an enormous country with mil-



## PARENTAL GUIDANCE

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lions and millions of people. The purely factual statistical odds that this is going to happen in your community with your family are infinitesimally small," Klungness says.

- **Don't change your "normal."** Have your children attend school, even if you want to keep them home. "If we avoid situations out of anxiety, it will get worse and worse," says Mitchell Schare, a Hofstra University professor of psychology who runs a phobia and trauma clinic there. "Your child needs to go to school and you need to go to work." If you give in to your anxiety now, you will become a slave to the new pattern, he says.

- **Know that the best minds in law enforcement are assessing the issue.** "The president of the United States — this is top on his agenda," Klungness says. "There are people dedicating themselves 24/7 to make sure this doesn't happen again."

- **Turn off the news.** "People sit sometimes for hours and hours waiting for a new morsel of information. People need to take a break from that," Schare says. You need to know broad strokes — how this will affect policy nationally and locally, Klungness says. But the event doesn't have to be the topic of dinner conversation or continue to constantly be in the forefront of your day.



Talking about the tragedy might help parents deal with their anxieties, mental health experts say.

- **Practice diversion and relaxation.** "This is a good time to turn on the holiday music, watch your favorite movie," Klungness says. Deep breathing, meditation and other techniques can help quiet stress. Avoid destructive behavior: Don't turn to self-comforting through alcohol or

drugs or inappropriate expressions of anger, Schare says.

- **Examine what the event triggered for you.** It might be bringing back memories of other losses, such as the sudden death of a parent or a time you felt threatened with violence, Klungness says. Acknowledging that can help. Ask yourself: "Am I paralyzed or fearful because this reminds me of...?" Klungness advises.

- **Talk to friends, spiritual leaders or mental health professionals.** "The school shooting brings home the harrowing message that no matter how organic we make their vegetables, how closely we supervise their play dates, how much we watch out for their allergies, we can't always keep our kids safe," Klungness says. "It's really in your face." Sharing emotions and hearing others' perspectives helps. Just don't use your children as your emotional sounding board or do your talking in front of

them. "Your child isn't made safer or happier by hearing that you're frightened, upset, worried or nervous," Klungness says.

- **Take action.** "If you're a person who says, 'Enough already with gun violence in this country,' and you want to get proactive, by all means do it," Schare says. "If you're a person who just wants to hug your children close in the next couple of days, that's OK, too. There's no right or wrong." Consider volunteering for a community effort completely unrelated to the tragedy, he says. "It's the sense of community support and connectedness that helps the human spirit overcome."

- **If all else fails, remind yourself there are only a couple of days until holiday break.** Then you will have a chance to put aside fears of what could happen in the classroom for a while, Clauselle says. Time may help you regain perspective.

## Tears, prayers, curses — and extra hugs

**F**acebook status updates of parent-friends said it all. "Speechless."

"Where is God when all of this is happening?"

"Every time I put my daughter on that bus I worry until the moment she comes home because this is the world we are living in."

Some of us lit candles on our front stoops. Some of us started gun-control groups. Others were thankful that their children had not no-

ticed the news. One cursed the gunman. Many prayed. Most wept.

And one friend summed up what all parents have been doing since the Sandy Hook shooting Friday, including me, the mother of a 9-year-old. He put up a photo



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of his son and another of his daughter, with this message: "These two are getting extra big hugs tonight. Never letting go."

Unfortunately, we will have to let go at some point, and that is the scariest part of being a parent. Little did the parents of the children massacred inside their classrooms know that they would never see their sons and daughters again.

— VALERIE KELLOGG